

Abstract

In modern society, madness is typically defined as a mental disease, pertaining to disorders that can affect one's mood, behavior, or thinking. Greek literature, however, often portrays madness as a religious punishment administered by the gods. This essay examines three Classical tragedies, Aeschylus' *Ajax*, and Euripides' *Herakles*, and *Hippolytus* to describe how madness was conceived in Classical antiquity. In each of these tragedies main characters experience madness as a punishment inflicted upon them by the gods and suffer greatly. Their madness also causes terrible consequences for their families. The essay describes the processes, causes, duration, and outward manifestations of madness in the three tragedies.

Significantly, the protagonists in each of these dramas are punished with madness for having offended goddesses. For instance, in *Ajax*, the hero is punished by Athena for having transcended human courage and for not having sacrificed to her. Hallucinating horribly under Athena's spell Ajax slaughtered herdsmen and farm animals believing them to be his enemies. When Athena withdraws his madness Ajax is forced to confront his terrible actions. Shamed and humiliated, he commits suicide. A similar dramatic pattern emerges. Human offense is followed by divine imposition of sensory hallucinations, paranoia, irrationality, and loss of agency. This psychological pain is cruelly magnified by shame and humiliation once the madness has been removed. In each of the three plays the protagonist is driven to consider, if not commit, suicide. These dramas, therefore give us a truly tragic vision of the disordered mind.